The Story of Astoria - 2698

MAGAZINE OF AMERICAN HISTORY

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THE STORY OF ASTORIA

WITH A SKETCH OF THE PACIFIC FUR COMPANY

Mr. H. H. Bancroft, in his gigantic undertaking, is giving us an immense amount of material for history, gathered with wonderful industry and regardless of expense, and when completed his work will be a library in itself, containing abridgments of everything ever written about the Pacific coast. But its value will be very much impaired if it should be found that he has been so strongly influenced by personal bias, that not only his judgment but his statements of facts have been warped by it. Such seems to the writer to be the case with the story of Astoria, as told by him in Vol. II. of "The Northwest Coast," Vol. XXIII. of the series. The chapters devoted to this disastrous enterprise appear to be a piece of special pleading, devoted principally to venting the author's spleen against Mr. Irving and Mr. Astor, and the whitewashing of Mr. McDougal. It does not seem just to the memory of Washington Irving and John Jacob Astor to let such an account go unchallenged. As it is partly a question of judgment and partly a question of fact, I will briefly tell the history of the Pacific Fur Company.

This company was organized in 1810. Astor furnished all the money, but associated with him a number of partners who were to share the profits, but not the losses. As few citizens of the United States had experience in the fur trade, he induced several members of the Northwest Company of Canada to join him, after first in vain offering an interest to that company. These associates were Duncan McDougal, Alexander McKay, Donald McKenzie, and David and Robert Stuart. Wilson Price Hunt was the only partner selected from the United States, and he was to be in command on the Pacific Coast. The partners had full power to dissolve the company at any time during the first five years, if they thought best to do so.

In September, 1810, one party sailed for the mouth of the Columbia in the *Tonquin*, McDougal being the leader, while Hunt went overland the following spring. April 12th, 1811, work was begun at Astoria, and during that year the foundation was laid for an extensive business by the establishment of posts on the Columbia and its tributaries to the foot of the mountains. In February, 1812, Hunt reached Astoria after an adventurous and difficult journey. In May the *Beaver* arrived, thesecond sup-

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ply ship sent out by Astor. The *Tonquin* had been captured by the Indians of Nootka Sound, and in August Hunt left in the *Beaver* to complete the necessary arrangements with the Russian governor at Sitka for what promised to be an exceedingly profitable trade. He did not return for more than twelve months, leaving McDougal in charge.

Meanwhile the Northwest Company had not been idle. In the summer of 1810 they had sent forward a party under command of one of the partners, David Thompson, to descend the Columbia and occupy the country in advance of the Pacific Fur Company. The country, however, was unexplored, and the river system imperfectly known, so that Thompson descended a tributary of the Fraser, believing it to be a branch of the Columbia, and when he discovered his mistake he had only time to gain Canoe River near the sources of the northern fork of the Columbia, when he was compelled to go into winter quarters, and most of his men deserted. Descending the river next spring, he arrived on the lower Columbia in July, 1811, only to find the Americans in possession. He was destitute of everything, but was liberally treated by McDougal, who supplied all his wants. Nothing daunted, the Northwest Company pushed forward along the Columbia and established posts competing with the upper ones of the Pacific Fur Company.

In December, 1812, McTavish, a leading partner of the Northwest Company, came to McKenzie's post at Fort Nez Percés, and informed him of the breaking out of war with England. McKenzie started at once for Astoria with the news, arriving there January 15, 1813, when McDougal at once made up his mind to abandon the enterprise and retreat across the Rocky Mountains during the summer. The other partners, however, upon their arrival objected to this, and it was agreed to continue business till June, 1814, when the company was to be dissolved, if no help and supplies were received from Mr. Astor meanwhile. In March of the same year Astor had dispatched a vessel from New York; but this was wrecked on the Sandwich Islands, and the blockade of the Atlantic coast by the British made it impossible to send another ship.

McKenzie was closely followed by McTavish, who reached Astoria in April and remained until July. He also was royally treated by McDougal, and even furnished with goods to trade on his way back, and pains were taken to put his party on a friendly footing with the Indians, who were looking askance at them as "King George men," the well-known enemies of the "Boston men." An arrangement was made with McTavish by which the property of the Pacific Fur Company was to be transferred to the Northwest Company, if no help came before next summer.

On August 20th Hunt arrived in the *Albatross*. He disapproved of the resolution taken by his partners; but as it was clearly within their powers, he could only acquiesce. The *Albatross* being under charter to go to the Marquesas Islands, he re-embarked in a few days to bring back another vessel by which such heavy stores might be removed as could not be taken across the Rocky Mountains, and it was agreed that if by some mischance Mr. Hunt should not return before the time came for carrying out the agreement with McTavish, then McDougal should have power to make all the necessary arrangements.

On October 7th McTavish returned, followed four days later by Stuart and McGillivray, two other partners of the Northwest Company, with seventy-five followers. Again they were entirely dependent on McDougal for supplies, and again they were liberally supplied. They brought news of the expected arrival of a British man-of-war, and entered into negotiations with McDougal which resulted in an agreement, signed October 16th, by which the furs, merchandise, forts, and all other property of the Pacific Fur Company were to be turned over to the Northwest Company as soon as an inventory could be taken. This was done, and the transfer completed October 23d. The consideration was about fifty-eight thousand dollars, the market value of the furs alone being twice this sum. November 30, the *Raccoon*, a British sloop of war, arrived, and Captain Black took formal possession of Astoria for his government, leaving shortly after. February 28, 1814, Hunt arrived in the *Pedler*, but too late.

These are the leading facts. They are given by Irving, and they are given by Bancroft, with one notable exception, to which we shall recur later. But to show Mr. Bancroft's animus I will quote a few of his statements relative to Mr. Astor and Mr. Irving.

"Whether success or failure waits on this enterprise, already John Jacob Astor is a great man. Bold, keen, grasping, with a mind no less fertile than sagacious, he is great, not as Newton, Washington, Lincoln and Peabody, but like Napoleon or Vanderbilt—a greatness not to be admired, but shunned." Now if this means anything more than bad taste on the part of the author, it means a very grave censure of Mr. Astor's motives, and yet he can find nothing worse to say about him than that "there is nothing in Astor's history that would imply him to be more than a respectable and wealthy merchant of common honesty and uncommon ability, desirous of increasing his wealth and respectability by every legitimate means at his command." If this estimate were true, I fail to see anything blameworthy in such a character, and yet Mr. Bancroft never lets an opportunity slip for a fling at the great merchant. "'The thing could be

done, and should be;' so said the autocrat." This of the man who had just put himself absolutely into the hands of his partners! Again: "Astor committed his venture to the deep and sat down to muse upon the profits." This of the man who had bound himself to advance four hundred thousand dollars free of interest, to bear all losses himself, and to divide any profits which might accrue! Of course Mr. Astor expected his venture to be a profitable one; but he seems to have been of the same class of merchants as those who founded the British empire in India. The grandeur of the undertaking appears to have moved him far more than the prospective profits, and there is every reason to believe that he was fully in earnest when he wrote that he should have preferred to have had his property fairly captured rather than given away, as he considered it was. That Mr. Astor's undertaking was looked at as an important one in a national point of view may be seen from a letter of Jefferson's, and no one was better able to appreciate its significance than the consummator of the Louisiana purchase. Jefferson says: "I considered as a great public acquisition the commencement of a settlement on that point of the western coast of America, and looked forward with gratification to the time when its descendants should have spread themselves through the whole length of that coast," etc.

Washington Irving receives even worse treatment at Mr. Bancroft's hands. He accuses him again and again of inventing facts and coloring his narrative unfavorably to McDougal; but, worse than that, he speaks of "the current of unqualified sycophancy, trickery, sentimentality, and maudlin praise which runs through [Irving's] 'Astoria.'" He states that "There are whole pages in 'Astoria' abstracted almost literally from Frauchère. Pretending to draw all his information from private sources, the author makes no allusion to the source to which he is most indebted, not even mentioning Frauchère's name once in his whole work." Further: "Up to this time the imputation that he had received money from Mr. Astor for writing 'Astoria' I believed to be utterly false, and unworthy of consideration. But in closely comparing with original evidence his statements concerning the New York fur merchant and his associates of the Northwest Company, I find them so at variance with truth and fairness that I am otherwise at a loss to account for his unusual warp of judgment."

It seems impossible, judging from these statements, that Mr. Bancroft can ever have read Irving's "Astoria" even so far as to the end of the introduction, or he would have found the following: "I have therefore availed myself occasionally of collateral lights supplied by the published journals of other travelers who have visited the scenes described—such as

Messrs. Lewis and Clarke, Bradbury, Breckenridge, Long, *Frauchère*, and Ross Cox—and make a general acknowledgment of aid received from these quarters." So much for the charge of plagiarism, which comes with peculiar ill-grace from an author whose history is mainly a scrap-book, made up from clippings of his authorities. The essential facts are all faithfully given by Irving; but no one can read "Astoria" without perceiving that its author has taken the dry bones of journals, logs, diaries, reports and business statements, and clothed them with his exquisite fancy until they have become a living reality, giving us one of the most charming narratives in the English language, and, withal, a truthful one.

The real trouble is that Mr. Bancroft seems to have made up his mind that McDougal must not be blamed for the disastrous outcome of the enterprise, and as the facts are overwhelmingly against him, abuse of Mr. Astor and Mr. Irving must take the place of favorable facts. In his defense of McDougal he is led into contradictory statements again and again. On page 147 this gentleman is described as "short and lithe, and quick of action." On page 214 he has grown into "by nature a cold-blooded man, stolid in body and mind." "Astor was peculiarly unfortunate in his fitting of character to position." "Hunt's great mistake was in leaving the coast at all," and yet McDougal "stumbled upon the best course, the only course proper to be pursued throughout the whole of this unpleasant and luckless adventure." But if McDougal's course was the only proper one, how had Astor been unfortunate in his selection of him? And where did Hunt's mistake come in, leaving him in charge? The facts are continually too strong for Mr. Bancroft, and, with all his twisting of them, he finds himself continually caught.

Mr. Irving's view seems to me the nearest right, but none of the historians of Astoria have sufficiently distinguished between what were two separate and distinct acts: the original agreement with McTavish in July, and the final sale to McTavish and McGillivray in October. According to the compact between Mr. Astor and his partners, it was clearly within the power of a majority of the latter to dissolve the company at any time within the first five years of its existence. The war with England did undoubtedly threaten serious danger to their enterprise, and McDougal may have honestly thought it best to exercise the powers which had been delegated to them, and close out the business in the best manner possible. He gains, first, McKenzie to his views, and receives, afterward, the reluctant assent of Clark and Stewart by putting off the dissolution another year, and then only if no help should arrive sooner. The agreement with McTavish seems also to have been provisional, and, as its purport is not

very clear, it may have been an advantageous one. When Hunt reached Astoria the following month, the resolution of the partners was evidently represented to him as a unanimous one, and even then he does not appear, as Mr. Bancroft says, to have indorsed the steps already taken by his partners, nor did he approve their "manifesto." He made a decided protest, but acquiesced in the inevitable, as the action of the partners was clearly within their authority. As he departed immediately for the purpose of chartering a vessel to remove all such goods as could not be taken across the mountains, it seems probable that the agreement with McTavish covered only the surrender of the posts. It could not have included the furs, as Frauchère says word was sent to the partners in the interior to forward all their furs to Astoria in the spring, that they might be shipped on the vessel Hunt was expected to bring. Before leaving, however, it was suggested by McDougal that some accident might prevent Hunt's return in time to carry out the agreement, and although the latter considered this very improbable, he acceded to McDougal's request that the carrying out of this agreement be put into his hands if Hunt should not return in time. It is very evident that this authority delegated to McDougal covered only the execution of those arrangements to which a majority of the partners had already given their assent. So far, McDougal's course would seem to have been reasonably fair, even if open to criticism as weak and showing his leaning toward his old associates of the Northwest Company. But we come now to the closing transaction, which is of an entirely different character.

Six weeks had barely passed since Hunt's departure, when McTavish reappeared at Astoria, this time closely followed by a large party, more than equal in number to the Astorians. They expected to meet an armed supply ship and a British man-of-war at the mouth of the Columbia; but neither had arrived, and it was very uncertain when they would arrive. The English party was without provisions and had lost their ammunition, so that they were entirely in McDougal's power. But they seem to have known their man, and we know the result—the surrender of all the possessions of the Pacific Fur Company at a nominal value and the adoption of McDougal as a partner in the Northwest Company. Mr. Bancroft argues very elaborately that this appears a fair transaction on both sides, and anyhow, the best that could be done under the circumstances. He lays especial stress on the protracted negotiations, claiming that the English held back in the hope of the arrival of their ship, and that McDougal brought them to the sticking point only by threatening to move up the Willamette and cut off their supplies. To sustain this view he gives a series of dates which I am unable to verify in the authorities quoted. He states

that according to Ross and Irving the British took possession of Astoria November 12th, and according to Frauchère November 23d. The facts are that the only date given by Irving is that of the signing of the contract, October 16th. He evidently considers this the only important date, as settling the matter beyond any possibility of withdrawal on either side. Frauchère's date is October 23d, and not November 23d, as stated by Mr. Bancroft. Ross I have not at hand, but this authority is repeatedly discredited by Mr. Bancroft himself, and he is certainly incorrect when he says (as quoted by Mr. B.): "Astoria was delivered up to the Northwest Company on the 12th of November, after nearly a month of suspense between the drawing and the signing of the bills," as the agreement itself specifies October 16th as the day on which it was signed and sealed. If this is not willful perversion of the facts, it is certainly at least inexcusable carelessness."

Instead of the negotiations dragging, they seem to me to have been conducted with great haste, considering the magnitude of the transaction. On October 11th the main Northwest flotilla arrived. On October 16th the contract was drawn up and signed, specifying that the delivery should be made as soon as the necessary inventories could be taken; and one week later, October 23d, the actual delivery took place. If McGillivray and McTavish had refused to receive the property after the signing of the agreement, when McDougal was ready to turn it over, and it had after such tender been taken by a British ship, there is not a court in Christendom which would not have compelled the Northwest Company to pay Mr. Astor according to the agreement, and it is absurd to argue that any drawing back on the part of the British was then attempted.

Mr. Bancroft says the other partners were on the spot and acquiesced in all that was done. This is not so. McKenzie was the only partner at Astoria at the time, and McDougal seems to have ignored him and acted alone under the authority which he claimed had been delegated to him by Hunt. But Hunt had not, and could not have done so, as this was a new matter which could only have been legally determined by a majority of the resident partners. This was evidently felt by McDougal, as the agreement between him and the North West Company, which is not even signed by McKenzie, begins as follows: "The Association heretofore carrying on the fur trade to the Columbia River and its dependencies, under the firm and denomination of the Pacific Fur Company, being dissolved on the 1st of July last, by Duncan McDougal, Donald McKenzie, David Stuart, and John Clarke, with the intention to abandon the trade in that quarter, it is hereby agreed," etc. I think it very plain, from what has already been stated, that this position is not tenable, as the proposed abandonment of

the enterprise in the summer of 1814 was at most provisional, and Frauchère, who is by far the best contemporary authority, says distinctly, referring to that transaction, that the Company "would probably have been dissolved by the remaining partners, but for the arrival of the energetic Mr. Hunt."

Mr. Bancroft twists himself into a new position and declares that McDougal took the wisest course possible, and that it would have been impossible for the Americans to maintain themselves on the Columbia if they could not get supplies by water from New York. It would be easy to show that there would have been no greater difficulty in their doing so than for the Northwest Company to carry on their business on the Fraser and upper Peace rivers; but even if it was still thought best to abandon the enterprise, nothing could have been easier than a temporary retreat from Astoria, as shown plainly by Frauchère, himself a Canadian and undisguisedly in sympathy with the English in the war, but faithful to the interests of his employer. The party of Northwesters could not possibly have maintained themselves on the lower Columbia till the arrival of the British sloop November 30th, as they were without food, ammunition or goods, and the Indians were but anxious for a word from the Americans to fall upon them. With this party out of the way it would have taken the Astorians but a few days to retreat beyond the reach of any English force from the sea, and it is even a question whether Astoria itself might not have been successfully defended, as no man-of-war could approach it within six miles and the Indians were all anxious to fight the English. But in any event the movable property might all have been saved and removed in the vessel with which Hunt arrived in the spring for that very purpose.

I can agree with Mr. Bancroft in but one point—that Mr. Astor was unfortunate in the selection of McDougal for a chief agent, both because of his relations with the Northwest Company and of his qualities as a man. But this does not relieve McDougal from deserved odium, and the verdict of history must be that of his countryman Frauchère, who was an eye-witness to and a participator in nearly all of these transactions, when he winds up his account of the sale of Astoria with these words: "Those at the head of affairs had their own fortunes to seek, and thought it more to their interest, doubtless, to act as they did; but that will not clear them in the eyes of the world, and the charge of treason to Mr. Astor's interests will always be attached to their characters."

P. Koch

BOZEMAN, MONTANA.

STATEMENT
OF
The Mutual Life Insurance Company of New York,
F. S. WINSTON, President.

For the year ending December 31st, 1884.

ASSETS.....$103,876,178.51

Annuity Account.

	No.	Ann. Payments.		No.	Ann. Payments.
Annuities in force, Jan. 1st, 1884	61	$33,184 25	Annuities in force, Jan. 1st, 1885	61	$33,661 68
Premium Annuities		3,674 96	Premium Annuities		3,904 44
Annuities Issued	5	1,706 70	Annuities Terminated	5	1,909 20
	66	$38,565 97		66	$39,565 97

Insurance Account.

	No.	Amount.		No.	Amount.
Policies in force, Jan. 1st, 1884	110,980	$342,946,092	Policies in force, Jan. 1st, 1885	114,804	$351,789,223
Risks Assumed	11,194	34,675,989	Risks Terminated	7,380	25,832,730
	122,184	$377,622,081		122,184	$377,622,021

Revenue Account.

Dr.			*Cr.*	
To Balance from last account		$94,972,108 86	By paid Death Claims	$5,226,220 83
" Premiums received		13,850,258 42	" " Matured Endowments	2,490,454 99
" Interest and Rents		5,245,059 96	" " Total claims—$7,717,675 82	
			" " Annuities	28,936 06
			" " Dividends	3,141,164 12
			" " Surrendered Policies and Additions	3,037,996 17
			" " Total paid Policy-holders—$13,923,052 19	
			" " Commissions, (payment of current and extinguishment of future)	907,946 19
			" " Premium charged off on Securities Purchased	1,131,172 88
			" " Taxes and Assessments	323,169 51
			" " Expenses	372,263 27
			" " Balance to New Account	97,006,913 09
		$114,067 427 27		$114,067,427 27

Balance Sheet.

Dr.			*Cr.*	
To Reserve at four per cent.		$96,342,532 00	By Bonds Secured by Mortgages on Real Estate	$46 976,527 92
" Claims by death not yet due		662,587 00	" United States and other Bonds	34,523,833 00
" Premiums paid in advance		27,477 36	" Loans on Collaterals	6,896,367 50
" Surplus and Contingent Guarantee Fund		4,743,771 15	" Real Estate	10,932,693 04
			" Cash in Banks and Trust Companies at interest	2,944,986 54
			" Interest accrued	1,923,418 54
			" Premiums deferred, quarterly and semi-annual	1,108,115 89
			" Premiums in transit, principally for December	138,714 51
			" Suspense Account	87,514 14
			" Agents' Balances	7,196 90
		$103,876,178 51		$103,876,178 51

NOTE.—If the New York Standard of four and a half per cent. Interest be used, the Surplus is over $18,000,000.

From the Surplus, as appears in the Balance Sheet a dividend will be apportioned to each participating Policy which shall be in force at its anniversary in 1885.

Assets.....$103,876,178.51

NEW YORK, January 31, 1885.

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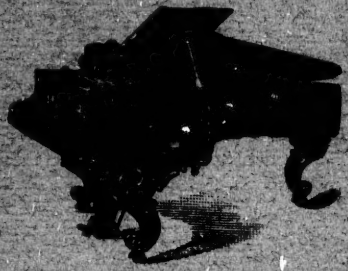

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